

EVENT RECAP

Post-COVID Cities: NYC Perspective

Overall **'working group'** framing categories for **Post-COVID Cities** program series:

- Transportation -- Streets -- Mobility
- Land Use -- Housing -- Zoning -- Economics
- Sustainability / Resilience -- Climate / Environment -- Environmental Justice -- Public Health

Program Date: Friday, 23 April 2021, 12:30-2:00pm

[See video](#)

Event Description

Built environment solutions are well positioned to guide post-COVID-19 recovery in New York City. Ambitious programs, policies, and practices have the potential to usher in a new era for our city.

This moment presents widespread opportunity to advance and leverage interconnected, sustainable, and equitable urban strategies for progressive, healthy, and economically viable design intervention. While we seek to encourage responses that yield optimal outcomes, we must also recognize that recovery will span issue-areas and boroughs; that our neighborhoods are not hospitable to one-size fits all solutions.

This program convened local civic leaders, professionals, and practitioners to share their perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on NYC's urban fabric -- at the intersection of equity, economy, and environment.

Speakers (in order of presentation; detailed presentation notes below):

A Post-Pandemic Vision for City Office Buildings

Stephen Cassell, FAIA, Principal, Architecture Research Office

Residential Conversion: Post COVID-19 Regulatory Constraints and New Proposals

Sheila Pozon, Special Counsel, Kramer Levin

The Future of Retail in the New Normal

Sulin Carling, Principal, HR&A Advisors

Neighborhoods Now and Beyond

Daniel McPhee, Executive Director, Urban Design Forum

25x25 Challenge

Philip Miatkowski, Director of Research, Transportation Alternatives

Mobility Perspective

Lian Farhi, Senior Planner, Sam Schwartz Engineering

Overview: Beginning with considerations around Central Business District (CBD) office-building-to-residential conversions, the discussion focused on our changing retail landscape from the perspective of the street. That shift in commerce and use has extended farther afield to our neighborhoods, which, through the crisis, have been the site of a wide range of impacts, interventions, and opportunities for post-pandemic investment. Presentations also discussed the street as the nexus of commerce and circulation, the changing paradigm of transportation, and the capacity of the public realm to be considered a supportive factor in under-resourced, developing, and revitalized communities, as well as serving as a defining factor of our formerly active and dense 9-5 CBD.

Discussion Topics:

- How will the **pace** of recovery impact the *effectiveness* of design **tools** deployed?
- We have a new set of relationships to contend with, including evolving work/life balance, leisure, and circulation. Is there an ideal calibration or **balance** (concentration, rhythm, or density) that is optimal as the “pulse” of recovery for the city? (i.e. CBDs vs. neighborhood development)
- Can recovery be **transformational**? What interventions are needed to encourage transformation, as opposed to reverting to business as usual?
- Does this frame for recovery depend on a fundamental **re-valuation**?
- How can design amplify and expose **co-benefits** from investment, in support of a more sustainable city and an equitable, transformational recovery?
- How does prioritizing *public health* when assessing the impacts of built environment interventions affect our understanding of **behavior change** as a tool to be used by design in advancing a transformational recovery?

Presentation Summaries

\\ 1 // A Post-Pandemic Vision for City Office Buildings

- Response to changing workplace landscape / affordable housing crisis / livable cities / climate change (through adaptive reuse, LL97 compliance)
- Conversion of Class B & C office buildings to residential
 - Manhattan CBD 14th St. to 60th St. / 9th Ave to Park Ave
 - 10M SF underperforming Manhattan office buildings
- Challenges: Low floor-to-floor height; deep façade to core; antiquated building systems; energy inefficient
- Transformational potential for redevelopment in CBD
 - Proposed mixed-use: 1/3 commercial, 2/3 residential with affordable housing
 - Value of mono-culture vs mixed-use districts?
- DCP currently holds position that MIH is not triggered if FAR is not increased. Since many of these commercial buildings would be considered overbuilt if converted to 100% residential, MIH will not be triggered unless legislation requires it.
- Sustainability: Reuse existing structure, embodied carbon = emissions reduction relative to new construction; LL97 compliance, built to latest energy standards, towards 80x50 goals.
- Related Articles:
 - Justin Davidson, “[Would You Want to Live in an Office Tower on East 38th Street? We asked an architecture firm to do a \(theoretical\) conversion](#),” Curbed, February 19, 2021.
 - Stephen Cassell, FAIA, and Richard Yancey, FAIA, “[Insight: A Post-pandemic Vision for City Office Buildings](#),” Building Energy Exchange, April 5, 2021.

\\ 2 // Residential Conversion: Post-Covid 19 Regulatory Constraints and New Proposals

- Rebalance supply/demand to encourage more resilient neighborhoods
- Legal constraints and obstacles to commercial to residential conversions:
 - Physical constraints to residential light and air requirements
 - Zoning regulations limit locations of residential uses
 - NYC Building Code residential use requirements
 - NYS Multiple Dwelling Law limits residential FAR to 12
- Consider precedent for residential conversions: Lower Manhattan in the 1990s and post-9/11
- Extensive transportation infrastructure assets designed to bring workers to Manhattan core
- Recent Proposals:
 - Governor’s Budget Bill (Applies to Manhattan below 60th St.; effective 7/1/2021- 12/31/2024; not enacted) – Would override other state and local zoning laws to encourage residential conversions in commercial and manufacturing districts. Requires 25% affordable/supportable housing

- NYS Gianaris/Reyes Bill (Applies to Manhattan below 60th St; \$100M allocated in NYS budget) – State purchases distressed hotels and some commercial properties to sell/lease to developers converting to 100% affordable housing
- NYS Kavanagh/Cymbrowitz Bill (Applies to Manhattan below 60th St; not enacted) – Allows conversion of Class B hotels with fewer than 150 rooms to low- to moderate-income residential use without alterations
- NYC Justin Brannan’s Proposal (Pending) – Proposed establishment of a taskforce to study conversion of vacant office space to affordable housing (now subject to ULURP process)
- Council Taskforce to conduct research

\\ 3 // The Future of Retail in the New Normal

- Pre-Covid Retail Disruptions
 - Rise of e-commerce: US on-line retail sales increased 50% from 2014 to 2019 and another 50% during first year of Covid-19 pandemic
 - Traditional dry retail was in decline in decade prior to Covid; wet retail (food and beverage) increased during same period
 - Increase of pop-ups, experiential retail, and brand flagship stores
 - Manhattan high-end retail vacancy rate in 2020 ranged from 20% to 39%
 - 10% considered healthy rate
 - City Council developed database after 2019 legislation (LL 197)
 - Oversupply of retail and unaffordable rents
- Covid-19 Impacts on the Manhattan Core
 - 45% decline in small NYC retail business in April 2021
 - CBD retail decline driven by loss of office workers and tourists
 - Future recovery dependent on return of most office workers and tourists
 - Outer-borough residential neighborhoods not experiencing as severe retail losses
- New Storefront Strategies for the New Normal
 - Short-term financial support to small businesses, esp. most vulnerable
 - Expand ground-floor uses focusing on experiences
 - Make zoning more flexible: remove ground-floor retail use requirements
 - Reinforce retail corridors
 - Leverage newly affordable rents due to Covid retail oversupply

\\ 4 // Neighborhoods Now and Beyond

- Pandemic hit hardest in NYC’s low-income neighborhoods of color
- Neighborhoods Now initiative conceived as design community’s response to Covid-19
- Intended to support community-led initiatives without access to relief programs and empower under-resourced communities
- Over 200 design volunteers provided pro-bono design services to 11 community organizations in four boroughs, aligning design, law, finance, public health aligned in service of community development
- Originally conceived as six-week sprint; ongoing support still being provided
- Pro-bono services provided: community promotional signage; support for small business re-openings; community consultations and resources; assistance in organizing community retail and cultural events; facilitation of public space activations; DIY interior space redesigns
- Ongoing efforts
 - Document Neighborhoods Now effort
 - UDF committed to continuing multi-disciplinary community development support to participating organizations beyond the pandemic
 - Showcase potential impact design can trigger

\\ 5 // 25x25 Challenge

- Challenge to new administration to reallocate 25% of NYC public street/sidewalk space, now dedicated to cars, to people by 2025
 - 75% of NYC's public streets/sidewalks currently dedicated to cars
 - 25x25 Challenge would reduce that to 56% in four years
 - Benefits: Provides more equitable mobility options and improves public health
- What could this look like? 500 lane miles of new, protected bus-only lanes; 40 lane miles of busways; 500 lane miles of new protected bike lanes; 1,000 lane miles of permanent open streets; 38M SF of open space for community use; 5.4M SF of space for outdoor retail and restaurants; 2.9M SF of expanded pedestrian space. Not one, but all of these quantifications.
 - Other possibilities: One-block-long car-free zones outside of NYC's 1,700 public schools; 19.4M SF of bike parking spaces; 80-foot-long zone for delivery, utility and freight use on every city block; 780,000 spaces for on-street car share and paid car parking; 18,000 SF for travel hubs outside of every subway station

\\ 6 // Mobility Perspective

- NYC streets in transitional moment
 - Open Streets/Open Restaurants
 - On-going complete streets transformations
- Change in mobility pattern
 - Work from home
 - Dependence on on-line shopping and deliveries
- How to develop a better framework to balance competing interests and priorities for street use?
 - Create interconnected street networks that prioritize ROW uses: pedestrians/public space > bikes > transit > trucks/service > private vehicles
 - Rethink hierarchy of street typologies according to location/use/intensity/safety
 - Empower neighborhoods to develop local solutions
- Proposed Framework
 - Flexible Streets
 - Accommodate diverse users and uses
 - Adaptable to season, time of day, temporary needs
 - Support new mobility modes
 - Smart Streets
 - Shift from complete streets concept to open-ended, organic development to allow for changing needs
 - Uses open-source data collection for decision-making and management
 - Supports sustainable infrastructure and technologies
 - Resilient Streets
 - Provide safer, comfortable trips prioritizing pedestrians and alternative mobility modes
 - Create better connectivity throughout city
 - Facilitate affordable mobility options
 - Reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and greenhouse gas emissions
- How to empower neighborhoods to control and manage their streets?
 - Determine proper balance of private entrepreneurship in public streets and spaces
 - Prioritize distribution of public resources, services, and programs to under-resourced and marginalized neighborhoods
 - Create BID mentor initiative to share knowledge and resources with under-resourced and marginalized neighborhoods

Takeaway Questions/Themes

Trends that existed before pandemic: affordable housing crisis; retail vacancies; Social and racial inequities; impacts/implications of climate change; streetscape innovations

Density vs Distribution – Shift to remote working during Covid

- Temporary or permanent trend?
- Economic impacts on Manhattan commercial core; impacts on neighborhoods/locations with increased WFH
- Long-term planning implications

Design/designer's role in relation to: quick interventions / institutional inertia (status quo) / transformations

- Public sector vs. private sector as drivers for innovation
- Recovery on whose terms?

Debrief Observations:

The "what" of design solutions is almost second to the "how" of implementation/facilitation.

Separating the what and the how, but identifying **critical aspects** of the how that determine the quality of the what, particularly when asking by or for whom, will suggest a pathway and shape for transformational recovery.

1. Factors (how)

GOVERNANCE

Governance, governance structure, and leadership will be instrumental in determining the course and transformational capacity of recovery in years to come.

PROCESS

Consensus is not the same as compromise and community benefits.

In top-down and bottom-up models, design/architects/planning is in the middle (facilitation is critical role).

CONTEXT (markets -- public/private; spending; regulatory environment)

Momentum for major shifts in ESG / CSR, to be leveraged through co-benefits of design / infrastructure investment;

\$\$ Public health lens for behavioral shifts (resilience/human sustainability goals)

\$\$ Shifting real-estate market and sustainability goals (LL97/carbon pricing)

\$\$ Transportation / infrastructure investments and sustainability goals

Recovery must be equitable: How is change to be instigated, instituted?

- Success requires political leadership tied to community participation
- Need leaders committed to vision
- How do we fully engage and empower communities?

2. Sites and Stakeholders (what and by/for whom)

CBD / NEIGHBORHOODS

Relationship between streets and buildings (movement:consumption / dwelling:working)

Buildings (changing behavior/use)

Streets (changing behavior/use)

Lifestyle/cultural shifts, recreation/leisure shifts

Does this say something about urbanism, from a historical perspective? It does, and should be named/made explicit.)

3. Goals TBD (Working group delineation)

4. Outcomes TBD

END (draft 5/19/21)